

EARLY RECOVERY ASSISTANCE IN SYRIA: BALANCING POLITICAL AND HUMANITARIAN GOALS

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Introduction

At the Sixth Brussels Conference in May 2022, a general agreement was reached for the first time among donor governments to increase so-called Early Recovery (ER) assistance in Syria¹. ER describes humanitarian activities that go beyond providing relief aid but do not amount to reconstruction. For example, instead of constantly sending water trucks and medical teams from abroad to communities in need, ER builds sustainable responses that reduce pressure on emergency aid by repairing water pumping stations and renovating health centers. In addition to essential services, the range of ER activities can include fields such as governance and the reintegration of displaced populations.²

While many areas of relief and development assistance can be lumped under the catch-all ER label, the relatively recent emergence of the term in the policy lexicon has made establishing a precise and widely accepted definition somewhat tricky. Western donor governments have not agreed on a standard definition, let alone one tailored to the Syrian context. Thus, the lines between ER assistance, emergency aid, stabilization, and reconstruction remain blurry. Furthermore, conclusive definitions are unlikely to emerge soon given that the ambiguity surrounding the term allows some flexibility that both politicians and humanitarians find helpful³. According to the Humanitarian Policy Group, “early recovery has functioned primarily as a way of framing activities, strategies and approaches that take place in humanitarian and transitional contexts⁴.” In other words, ER is best understood as a marketing term.

Semantics aside, there is agreement that an increase in projects beyond emergency assistance

is necessary and beneficial to meet Syria’s ever-growing humanitarian needs amid ongoing conflict. However, that was not always the case. While a limited number of projects that could be labeled as ER have been implemented since 2013 — UN OCHA even established an ER cluster in 2017 — donor support was lukewarm at best⁵. Moreover, the scale of ER activities in Syria and the political consequences of the required coordination with Syrian authorities remains contentious. Contrary to reconstruction, ER follows a humanitarian needs-based logic and can be conducted without formal cooperation with Assad’s government. However, realities in the country require, at a minimum, close coordination with Damascus and de facto authorities in areas outside the regime’s control in the northwest and northeast. This type of coordination used to be politically problematic. As recently as 2021, France and the United States stood against increased ER assistance because they saw it as tantamount to reconstruction that was off-limits without a credible political transition in line with UNSCR 2254⁶.

More recently, however, a general orientation towards ER assistance is no longer seen as a red line⁷. This change of attitude is due to broader circumstances.

¹ See: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2022/05/10/> (accessed 15 November 2022). It was not the first statement that mentioned the need to increase ER support, but it was the first time that there was genuine agreement instead of lip services or ill-concealed rejection from key donors such as the US and France (Interview with EU diplomat, Zoom, 20 October 2022).

² Bailey, S., Pavanello, S., Elhawary, S., O’Callaghan, S., *Early recovery: an overview of policy debates and operational challenges*, 2009, online: <https://odi.org/en/publications/early-recovery-an-overview-of-policy-debates-and-operational-challenges/> (accessed 15 November 2022).

³ See: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-politics-of-early-recovery-aid-in-syria-is-it-actually-reconstruction-aid/>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ A staff member of a European development agency (Phone interview, 30 September 2022), noted that due to their small scale and a lack of strategic planning, projects run by Europeans only had little impact on communities so far, particularly in northeast Syria. See also: <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2022/06/conflict-of-interests-rules-syrias-early-recovery-agenda-projects/> (accessed 14 November 2022).

⁶ Interview with EU diplomat, Zoom, 20 October 2022.

⁷ Interview with EU diplomat, 15 November 2022. See also: <https://syria.un.org/en/206312-italy-partners-un-syria-scale-multi-sectoral-resilience-assistance-vulnerable-conflict> (accessed 15 November 2022).

Evolving circumstances prompt mood change

Firstly, ER meets stakeholders' agendas, including the EU Delegation to Syria under Dan Stoenescu and the UN Resident & Humanitarian Coordinator's office under Imran Riza. They both advocate for conducting ER activities in coordination with Assad's government⁸. Such stakeholders were able to expand their room for maneuver concerning Syria policy as the West shifted its focus and resources to the conflict with Russia over Ukraine. Thus, ER assistance is a suitable framework as it does not cross declared policy lines on reconstruction while allowing for comprehensive rehabilitation projects.

Secondly, donor governments and humanitarian actors increasingly seek more financially sustainable approaches to meet Syria's growing humanitarian needs⁹. Properly implemented, ER can be more cost-effective and self-sustaining than relief aid in supporting the resilience of communities in need. This is an important factor given the deteriorating humanitarian situation and decreased international attention and funding.

Thirdly, UNSCRs 2585¹⁰, 2642¹¹, and 2672 urge donor governments to increase ER support. The resolutions had come out of the West's bargaining with Russia over an extension of the so-called cross-border mandate allowing UN humanitarian aid deliveries from Turkey to opposition-held northwest Syria without Assad's approval. However, beginning in July 2021, Russia conditioned an extension for the last crossing in northwest Syria on an international commitment to route more aid

through Damascus and increase ER assistance¹². It did so after forcing the closure of UN entry points from Jordan and Iraq and one of two points from Turkey.

Although the resolutions are not legally binding, their political signaling effect gives legitimacy to advocates of ER. Given that cross-border access constitutes an effective bargaining chip, Russia approved another six-month extension on 9 January 2023. However, its UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia emphasized that future renewals would only happen if the "approach of UNSCR members to [the] provision of humanitarian assistance to Syria changes in terms of quality¹³." Irrespective of whether Russia will demand further movement on the ER front or use its leverage otherwise, the West, particularly Europeans, are well advised to find a common position on their individual and joint ER activities in Syria. The shift towards more ER in regime areas is already happening. The question is how political and humanitarian considerations will be weighed and whether they can be balanced.

The price of doing business with Damascus

Russia sees ER as a bridge between relief aid and reconstruction. It wants to press ahead with the gradual normalization of the Assad regime by steering the discourse away from conflict (a political term) to more technical recovery assistance issues suggesting that Syria has reached a post-conflict phase. The marketing term "Early Recovery" comes in handy in this situation. The results of such attempts to manipulate the discourse are hard to qualify. However, they certainly contribute to a climate in which UN agencies, such as UN-Habitat, can sometimes act contrary to humanitarian principles and the UN's own agreed policy lines¹⁴. For example, in a recent report on the recovery

⁸ "Close coordination" refers to technical cooperation with Syrian government ministries. See for example: <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2022/09/infrastructure.pdf> (accessed 5 December 2022); <https://erc.undp.org/evaluation/documents/download/11203> (accessed 5 December 2022); <https://theconversation.com/the-european-union-in-syria-too-complacent-193988> (accessed 5 December 2022); <https://unsdg.un.org/latest/blog/building-community-resilience-break-cycle-suffering-syria> (accessed 16 November 2022).

⁹ See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/our-commitment-to-a-sustainable-solution-to-the-conflict-and-humanitarian-crisis-in-syria-uk-statement-at-un-security-council> (accessed 4 February 2023)

¹⁰ See: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2585> (accessed 15 November 2022).

¹¹ See: <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2642> (accessed 15 November 2022).

¹² See: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2022/06/27/Is-Russia-about-to-block-a-key-aid-route-into-northwest-Syria> (accessed 14 November 2022).

¹³ See: https://russiaun.ru/en/news/090123_n (accessed 4 February 2023).

¹⁴ The UN's Parameters and Principles of UN assistance in Syria state that "Only once there is a genuine and inclusive political transition negotiated by the parties, would the UN be ready to facilitate reconstruction." See: <https://www.voltairenet.org/article202706.html> (accessed 16 November 2022).

of services and infrastructure in Syria, UN-Habitat urged policymakers to “transcend typical divisions across humanitarian, early-recovery and long-term reconstruction and development goals¹⁵. “Despite its opaque and jargon-filled language, the report proposes to “support recovery wherever it can be achieved.” Thus, it is clear that the UN agency does not merely seek to build a bridge between relief aid and reconstruction but intends to obscure the distinction entirely¹⁶. This indirect call for reconstruction, which would require formal cooperation with the Assad regime and dismantling humanitarian and UN principles, is even more problematic given that the entire report focuses exclusively on regime areas.

For now, funding limitations mean ER will only constitute a small percentage of humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian actors are finding it hard to maintain day-to-day relief aid operations. Even though ER can be more cost-effective, it requires time and long-term investment. The scope for investments hardly exists today, partly because of donor fatigue and partly because of rising global prices and inflation in the US and EU¹⁷.

From a humanitarian view, ER promises a real potential to deliver improved essential services and better public health and educational capacity. From a political view, however, it is impossible to dismiss the risks of the full-throttle pursuit of ER so easily. First and foremost, the Assad regime could potentially profit even further from UN contracts. One recent study found that in 2019 and 2020, \$137 million of UN money went to Syrian companies linked to human rights abusers, war profiteers, sanctioned persons, and other figures connected to Assad’s inner circle¹⁸. According to another study, a further US\$100 million was siphoned from the aid budgets of Western aid agencies in 2019 and 2020 through currency

manipulation¹⁹. Assad has proven to be masterful at misusing and exploiting UN humanitarian assistance to his advantage²⁰. Beyond lining its pockets, in recent years, the Assad regime has sought to strategically re-entrench itself in former opposition strongholds like Homs and Eastern Ghouta through legislation and administrative measures designed to encourage loyalists to rebuild on land owned by IDPs and refugees stripped of their HLP rights²¹. Reconstruction-oriented ER projects in areas where large-scale displacement has occurred could give the Assad regime the financial means to alter Syria’s demography irreversibly²². According to an HRW report, “the Syrian government has developed a policy and legal framework that allows it to co-opt humanitarian assistance and reconstruction funding to fund its atrocities, advance its own interests, punish those perceived as opponents, and benefit those loyal to it.”²³

At the national level, as long as there is no equitable formula for the distribution of ER assistance according to a genuine Whole-of-Syria approach, ER assistance risks further cementing the country’s state of de facto division into three parts.²⁴ According to a former humanitarian coordinator, UN agencies in opposition-held areas of northwest Syria used to record various basic activities as ER, such as replacing school windows or small-scale Cash for Work (CfW) programs. This creates the impression of an equitable distribution of assistance. In reality,

¹⁵ UN Habitat, *Recovery of Services and Infrastructure in Syria*, 2022, p. 10, online: <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2022/09/infrastructure.pdf> (accessed: 14 November 2022).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁷ See: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2022/12/01/financing-appeals-OCHA-global-humanitarian-overview> (accessed 3 December 2022).

¹⁸ See: <https://www.occrp.org/en/blog/16940-millions-in-un-funding-flow-to-war-profiteers-and-human-rights-abusers-in-syria-study-shows> (accessed 30 November 2022).

¹⁹ See: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-assad-regime-systematically-diverts-tens-millions-aid> (accessed 30 November 2022)

²⁰ See: <https://syacd.org/weaponization-of-aid-interference-and-corruption> (accessed 30 November 2022).

²¹ See: <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/no-return-to-homs-a-case-study-on-demographic-engineering-in-syria> (accessed 30 November 2022).

²² See: <https://paxforpeace.nl/media/download/policybrief-syria-hlp-2020-english-10-03-2020.pdf> (accessed 30 November 2022).

²³ See: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/06/28/rigging-system/government-policies-co-opt-aid-and-reconstruction-funding-syria> (accessed 30 November 2022).

²⁴ Syria is now divided into three distinct areas: the Russia- and Iran-backed Assad regime controls 60 per cent of the country’s territory and population; the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)/ Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) controls 30 per cent of the territory and 15 per cent of its population, and the Turkey-backed opposition (Syrian National Army (SNA)/Syrian Interim Government (SIG)) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)/Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) control the remaining 10 per cent of the territory and 25 per cent of its population. See: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2022/a-new-conflict-management-strategy-for-syria/introduction/> (accessed 30 November 2022).

urban re-development activities such as removing rubble and repairing homes on a district-wide level received institutional UN support under the ER label only in regime areas. The most likely danger is that regime areas slowly regain a certain level of self-sufficiency while non-regime areas (home to 40% of Syria's overall population) are kept in a relief aid limbo. According to the opposition-aligned Syria Response Coordinators team, whose reporting was featured in a UN Security Council dialogue session on 21 November 2022, the total value of ER projects implemented in regime areas reached more than 90 percent of the total funding allocated for 2022/23.²⁵ Diametrically, Russia's representative to the UN lamented in a Security Council meeting held a week later that "Western donors make the most of financing for early recovery projects go to the territories out of Damascus' control."²⁶ In January 2023, Russia claimed that only 35% of the funding would go to regime areas due to the West's politicization of humanitarian assistance.²⁷ While verifiable data on the actual distribution does not currently exist, the contradictory statements illustrate how politically charged the issue has become.

Even within regime areas, the limited ER assistance provided so far has been subject to undue interference and manipulation. For example, a 2020 report into health system disparities in Daraa found that "the Syrian government heavily regulates the handful of UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who continue to support health programs in the south by limiting permissions for NGO registration and access, taking excessively long to approve projects, and restricting monitoring visits."²⁸ With the lack of effective third-party monitoring that ensures that aid reaches the target group or area, legitimate questions can be raised over where tens of millions of European taxpayer euros have ended up. UN-Habitat is

sober about the risks but says that donors have at least a partial responsibility for ensuring remedial action. "Delivering aid within this environment will likely continue to present [a] potential for reputational risk of unintentional support to [the] national government, contravening key sanction restrictions and requiring consistent and continuing risk mitigation efforts," it said, continuing that donors, aid agencies, and legitimate partners alike are exposed to this risk. Thus, they are essential stakeholders in designing and applying mitigative responses."²⁹

Changing Syria priorities

Sceptics will point to ER being the next chapter of absurdities that have been a feature of humanitarian assistance programming throughout the Syrian conflict.³⁰ For a decade now, humanitarians have been forced to beg the Assad regime for access to trapped civilians besieged by the regime's forces. The thought of rebuilding the same infrastructure Assad has destroyed in his war against parts of the population is hard to endure for many who are professionally and personally close to the conflict. For the Syrian opposition's negotiators in Geneva, ER is welcomed only cautiously, given that they suspect most of the assistance will be spent in regime areas and that there is a risk that Assad will exploit ER to dilute the provisions of UNSCR 2254 even further while doing nothing to advance the political process.³¹

Nevertheless, the answer from a humanitarian perspective is relatively straightforward. The commitment to humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence means that humanitarian assistance must never depend on political considerations. This is in theory. In reality, however, the idea that humanitarian assistance could be insulated from politics is illusory. The orientation of UN programming towards ER has been encouraged by some donor governments and refugee host countries who wish to come to

²⁵ See: <https://syrianobserver.com/news/80290/more-than-90-of-humanitarian-funding-goes-to-areas-controlled-by-syrian-regime.html> (accessed 1 December 2022).

²⁶ See: https://russiaun.ru/en/news/291122_n (accessed 1 December 2022).

²⁷ See: https://russiaun.ru/en/news/090123_n (accessed 4 February 2023).

²⁸ See: <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/obstruction-and-denial-health-system-disparities-and-covid-19-in-daraa-syria> (accessed 30 November 2022).

²⁹ See: <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2022/09/infrastructure.pdf> (accessed 30 November 2022).

³⁰ Interview with head of European NGO, Zoom, 12 October 2022.

³¹ Interview with Syrian Negotiation Commission President Dr Badr Jamous, 30 October 2022.

terms with Assad's claim to power.³² It does not necessarily need to imply immediate or formal normalization. A soft normalization predicated on maintaining "technical" contacts with Damascus on humanitarian aid and ER programs might do the job just as well with considerably less political risk. The reasons for the slow-motion drift to Damascus range from bureaucratic vested interest to ideological sympathy and, particularly from the EU perspective, a desire to stem refugee flows.³³ The priority of preventing further EU inward migration concerns not only Syria but the entire Mediterranean region. The European Commission recently demonstrated increased interest in funding projects related to voluntary return and reintegration among Tunisian and Moroccan migrant communities in Europe instead of extending existing projects that promoted inclusion in host countries.³⁴ While it remains unlikely that significant numbers of refugees³⁵ will return to Syria under Assad, in large part because of safety concerns³⁶ and economic disincentives, the European "migrant crisis" has made ER assistance appear as a more attractive solution by keeping those in Syria in tolerable living conditions.

These changing attitudes in Brussels and some European capitals have strained Europe's Syria policy line. On paper, the top EU strategic objective in Syria is "an end to the war through a genuine political transition, in line with UNSCR 2254, negotiated by the parties to the conflict under the auspices of the UN Special Envoy for Syria."³⁷ In a joint statement on Syria, the EU, France, Germany, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States committed to "reaching a political solution to the Syrian crisis consistent with UN Security Council

resolution 2254."³⁸ Furthermore, the EU's High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell said in 2021 that "there would be no end to sanctions, no normalization, no support for reconstruction until a political transition is underway. This is the long-standing position of the European Union."³⁹

This long-standing position is being stress-tested almost to breaking point as policymakers and humanitarians debate the best way to implement ER. The main political risk of significantly increasing ER assistance lies in its potential to undermine the two major tools of influence that Europeans still have to achieve a negotiated solution: ostracizing the Assad regime diplomatically and economically and making reconstruction contingent on progress in the UN-led political process. Expanding ER without politically-informed guidelines will very likely further blur European policy lines by implementing projects that are not dissimilar to reconstruction cumulatively and by doing so implicitly reinforcing the Assad regime's claim to power. Part of the problem is the elastic nature of the ER label that lends itself to loose interpretations. Therefore, part of the solution should be to create a clear ER framework informed by political as well as humanitarian considerations.

³² See: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/27/eu-syria-policy-assad-migration> (accessed 29 November 2022).

³³ See: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/27/eu-syria-policy-assad-migration/> (accessed 15 November 2022).

³⁴ Interview with NGO staff, online, 16 November 2022.

³⁵ See: <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-business-syria-lebanon-beirut-29cea760e8b855e63b9f84d0593a1250> (accessed 29 November 2022).

³⁶ See: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/09/syria-former-refugees-tortured-raped-disappeared-after-returning-home/> (accessed 29 November 2022).

³⁷ See: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/syria/european-union-and-syria_en?s=209#:~:text=The%20EU's%20strategic%20objectives%20in,key%20international%20and%20regional%20actors (accessed 29 November 2022).

³⁸ <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/joint-statement-on-syria/2549538> (accessed 7 December 2022).

³⁹ See: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/syria-ten-years-we-still-need-political-solution-addresses-root-causes-conflict_en (accessed 7 December 2022).

Guidelines to balance humanitarian and political considerations

Undoubtedly, ER assistance is needed by civilians trapped by more than a decade of war. It can help alleviate suffering and meet current and future humanitarian challenges. That said, policymakers should not see ER as purely a humanitarian matter. Because of its political implications, political guidelines for expanding ER programming are needed to maximize its benefits. It must also avoid gifting the Assad regime an additional opportunity to reconsolidate power and manipulate aid.

The following recommendations constitute guidelines that help to balance humanitarian obligations with the need to maintain the European policy line on Syria:

1. **Reconfirm policy lines.** Europeans need to reconfirm their policy lines on Syria and stick to them. Despite evidence of systemic regime misuse of humanitarian assistance⁴⁰, documents meant to guide ER activities in Syria, such as the UN Strategic Framework, are neither in the spirit of EU Council Conclusions nor the UN Parameters on Principles for Engagement on Syria.⁴¹ Staying firm on agreed policy lines at a European level balances the political and humanitarian pillars of the UN response, which is essential because the humanitarian crisis in Syria is a consequence of an unsolved political crisis.⁴²
2. **Insist on the highest standards.** Europeans should condition a gradual, three-year increase in funding for ER projects on the application of the highest standards regarding project planning, design, monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and local community oversight

and ownership. Human Rights organizations and think tanks have published extensive research on deficiencies and provided suggestions for improvements.⁴³ In addition, due to the politically and legally sensitive impact of ER projects, donors should invest in a thorough assessment to base their contributions on accurate analysis of the political environment and political implications.

3. **Do not misuse ER to push for unsafe IDP/refugee return.** ER projects to improve the living conditions for disadvantaged Syrians should not be used to support IDP/refugee return programs that do not meet international standards.⁴⁴ UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen has repeatedly argued that improved essential services are a crucial element of a “safe, calm, and neutral environment”, which would constitute a prerequisite for returns.⁴⁵ However, implementing ER projects alone does not constitute a safe environment for refugees to return nor suggests a change in attitude by the Assad regime, which has shown little enthusiasm for facilitating returns.⁴⁶
4. **Apply a genuine Whole-of-Syria approach.** ER assistance must be distributed in all areas of control in Syria in a qualitatively and quantitatively egalitarian manner to the largest extent possible. None of the de facto authorities in Syria, including the Assad regime, can claim significant legitimacy. Consequently, a helpful rule of thumb to detect inconsistencies in the European approach is to only fund activities that generally would receive the green light for implementation in all areas of control. For example, if donors or UN institutions suggest implementing a particular project in regime areas but have political reservations about implementing it in non-regime

⁴⁰ Hall, N., *Rescuing Aid in Syria*, 2022, online: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rescuing-aid-syria> (accessed 15 November 2022).

⁴¹ *The UN's Strategic Framework for Syria 2022-2024 led to protests by the US, Belgium, and Germany, who called it “fundamentally flawed,” “divorced from reality”, and that it would “ignore the fact that the conflict, specifically the Assad regime’s brutal war against its own people, is the main cause of Syrian’s suffering today”.* See: <https://usun.usmission.gov/statement-on-the-adoption-of-undps-country-program-document-for-syria/> (accessed 16 November 2022).

⁴² Interview with former EU diplomat, 7 October 2022, WhatsApp.

⁴³ See: https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/01/27/hrw-and-sldp-guide-human-rights-compliant-procurement-processes-syria#_ftn25 (accessed 16 November 2022); Hall, N., *Rescuing Aid in Syria*, 2022, online: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rescuing-aid-syria> (accessed 15 November 2022).

⁴⁴ See: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/06/forced-return-syrians-lebanon-unsafe-and-unlawful> (accessed 29 November 2022).

⁴⁵ See: <https://specialenvoysyria.unmissions.org/united-nations-special-envoy-syria-mr-geir-o-pedersen%E2%80%99s-remarks-brussels-v-conference-%E2%80%99Csupporting> (accessed 29 November 2022).

⁴⁶ See: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/data-shows-nowhere-syria-safe-return> (accessed 7 December 2022).

areas, this indicates that there are political double standards at play that compromise humanitarian principles.⁴⁷ ER assistance should be conditioned on genuine cooperation by local authorities in all of Syria and meeting the highest standards. Such cooperation should be rewarded while bad faith engagement should carry a price.

5. Do not hand the power of definition to Russia and the Assad regime. The level of support for projects implemented under the ER label should remain relatively limited. Projects that attempt to create resilient, self-sustaining solutions for recovery should instead be supported under “humanitarian plus.” It is a well-established term that the EU and the UN commonly use to frame their humanitarian response in places like Afghanistan.⁴⁸ In Syria, Russia imposed the term “Early Recovery” on the UN Security Council in the context of bargaining with the West — or, rather, blackmailing it — on the extension of the cross-border mandate.⁴⁹ This means that the concept has been hijacked by Russia and is, therefore, too politicized. Fully embracing it means surrendering the prerogative of interpretation, which would make it easier for Russia or China to misuse humanitarian concepts in the future.

6. Enhance efforts to align positions on areas outside the Assad regime’s control. An understanding between the Europeans, the US, and Turkey, on how to approach non-regime-held areas is needed to facilitate well-planned ER activities. For that to happen, it will be necessary to challenge and reassess existing views in a way that allows for pragmatic engagement with regional and local actors. The aim would be to increase connectivity between Syria’s northwest and northeast, beginning with win-win deals on aid, trade,

and local services, focusing on activities in the ER cluster such as electricity, water, and education.

7. Approach the Syrian conflict first and foremost as a political crisis. Europeans cannot expect the UN OSE to make progress on a political solution while hesitating on proactive political engagement. Turkey’s recent cautious diplomatic opening to Damascus is an urgent reminder that Europeans must constantly adapt their Syria strategy.⁵⁰ For all its media fanfare, Turkey’s unilateral opening to Damascus has not produced an apparent breakthrough. Thus, reciprocally investing in bilateral channels with Damascus will only grant Russia the ability to play the sides against each other and further deepen rifts within the Western camp. Instead, Europeans should define realistic milestones on the path towards implementing UNSCR 2254 and initiate dialogue with their partners (most prominently the US and Turkey) on how to achieve them.

Manage now, resolve tomorrow

European engagement in ER assistance is a humanitarian and political balancing act that deserves attention beyond small specialist groups in which the matter is currently being discussed. The humanitarian obligation to mitigate Syrian civilian suffering must be balanced with the political risks of buying into a framework pushed by Russia to consolidate its ally’s power in Damascus. For that to happen, increased ER assistance and similar activities conducted under a “humanitarian plus” or “resilience” label require the highest quality and transparency standards. Equally important is the concurrent European investment in advancing a political solution after a decade of failed talks in Geneva. Neither a passive wait-and-see approach nor a headlong rush to Damascus will lead to the sort of stability Europeans desire.

With conflict resolution out of reach for the time

⁴⁷ See for example this reflection on double standards in aid distribution based on a conversation with leaders of Syrian armed opposition groups in the Peace Spring area: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/syrias-eastern-factions-unite-liberation-and-construction-movement-conversation> (accessed 7 February 2023).

⁴⁸ See: <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/8/16/fit-for-purpose-getting-humanitarian-aid-right-in-afghanistan-one-year-after-the-taliban-takeover> (accessed 29 November 2022).

⁴⁹ Interview with former European diplomat, Zoom, 5 October 2022.

⁵⁰ See: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/in-syria-cutting-and-running-is-not-on-the-cards-for-turkey/> (accessed 17 November 2022).

being, Europeans should instead protect their tools of influence and frame their Syria policy in terms of conflict management. This is crucial from a humanitarian perspective, given growing needs, but also a political one given that UNSCR 2254 negotiations are unlikely to succeed without a conducive environment on the ground established through conflict management tools. Humanitarian assistance beyond emergency aid can be promising in this regard. For example, vital infrastructure such as water pumping stations and electricity grids often have a crossline dimension that can help reduce violence between competing areas of control. Moreover, activities that fall under the ER label have the potential to increase connectivity between the regime and non-regime areas, which means that they can raise the threshold for the use of violence and create pragmatic linkages that improve living conditions for all Syrians.⁵¹

Given the challenges presented by ER assistance in the Syrian case, moving away from a dogmatic normative and institutional distinction between humanitarian and political engagement appears long overdue. This appeal should not be confused with an attempt to abandon humanitarian principles. Rather, it is about protecting those principles amid a complex and highly political conflict environment. Europeans should acknowledge the political implications of their humanitarian engagement and design engagement frameworks accordingly. Those frameworks that pretend to be purely humanitarian while in practice brushing up against political red lines, and in some cases exceeding them, result in lose-lose outcomes where humanitarian principles are undermined for little to no advancement of European policy.

⁵¹ Abdeh, M., Hauch, L., *A new conflict management strategy for Syria*, 2022, online: <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2022/a-new-conflict-management-strategy-for-syria/> (accessed 15 November 2022).

